

France, 1917.

The Future of U.S. Overseas Presence

By DAVID S. YOST

The future of U.S. overseas military presence cannot be properly assessed without going back to first principles. It is essential to examine the historical pattern and purposes of presence; domestic economic and political factors likely to affect overseas commitments; the future security environment, including possible requirements for U.S. action; the changing nature of warfare; and the basic choices that we will face as our policies stop coasting on the residual inertia of the immediate post-Cold War era.

These choices will ultimately concern how to conduct sensible policies and strategies within a broad approach of overseas engagement. This article argues that disengagement could not satisfy U.S. national security objectives. If the United States is to be guided by a prudent assessment of its strategic position, it must accept responsibilities for continuing engagement in the management of international security affairs. Moreover, it is urgent to place the debate on overseas presence in a broad, long-term context. Some recent discussions of presence have been based on a short-term perspective—no more than a few years—and influenced by intra-alliance burden-sharing disputes or interservice competition for resources. Decisions on presence must be reached in light of larger choices about security commitments, economic interests, national purposes, and grand strategy.

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Historical Overview

Prior to 1898, the Nation deployed almost no land forces in peacetime outside the territory that became the continental United States, except for token forces in Alaska after its purchase from Russia in 1867.¹ For most of the 19th century, U.S. forces did not have to go overseas to engage external presence challenges. Central preoccupations were economic progress, national cohesion, and continental expansion. The adversaries in ensuring freedom of navigation or realizing the

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“manifest destiny” of the Nation included Britain, France, Spain, Mexico, and American Indian tribes. Overseas military operations consisted primarily of brief expeditionary actions in North Africa and the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and Central America, and Asia. Some operations were small in scale but relatively prolonged (for instance, the First Barbary War against Tripoli, 1801–05), while others had significant consequences (such as opening Japan to international trade in 1853–54).²

These operations were facilitated by naval detachments that cruised far from North America almost continuously, such as the Mediterranean (1801–07; 1815–61), European (1865–1905), East India (1835–61), and Asiatic (1866–1902) squadrons. With a few exceptions (such as Yokohama, Nagasaki, Hong Kong, Macao, Gibraltar, Port Mahon, Spezia, and Villefranche), the Nation was reluctant to establish depots or shore facilities abroad, and foreign ports were used on a minimal basis. Navy policy called for employing floating storeships anchored at rendezvous points.³

The turning point came in 1898, partly because of the annexation of Hawaii—the treaty of 1887 had granted America the right to establish a base at Pearl Harbor—and partly because of the Spanish-American War, through which Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines were acquired. Moreover, America obtained part of Samoa in 1899 from

Britain and Germany. As a byproduct of the war with Spain, Cuba in 1903 leased Guantanamo Bay indefinitely. Also in 1903, Washington recognized the independence of Panama and gained control of the Canal Zone in perpetuity.⁴

The Spanish-American War was also significant because it (and the Venezuelan boundary crisis, 1895–96) inaugurated an era of U.S. interventionism in Latin America. President Theodore Roosevelt declared a “corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine in 1904 that asserted a national right to assume “an international police power” in “flagrant cases of . . . wrong-doing or impotence” in the Western Hemisphere. The United States intervened repeatedly in Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. Some interventions were prolonged (for example, Haiti, 1915–34, and Nicaragua, 1912–33, almost continuously). Franklin D. Roosevelt’s noninterventionist “Good Neighbor” policy in 1933 marked the end of this phase.

The main historic thrust of U.S. isolationism was to keep clear of war in Europe, a policy that was sustained until World War I. American forces were sent to Europe in 1917–18 for combat and post-war occupation duties (in Germany until 1923), and to Siberia and northern Russia for intervention (1918–20) in the Russian civil war. After these events associated with World War I, however, overseas deployments of ground forces were mainly limited to areas acquired or leased at the turn of the century. In 1939 about a quarter of the Army was assigned outside the continental United States (20,000 in Hawaii, 17,000 in the Panama Canal Zone, 4,000 in the Philippines, 900 in Puerto Rico, and 400 in Alaska) while the Navy was based at Guantanamo Bay, Samoa, Guam, Hawaii, the Canal Zone, the Virgin Islands, and the Philippines. The Navy regularly cruised the international waters of the Caribbean and elsewhere, however, and the United States based troops and ships in China (including gunboats on the Yangtze) continuously from 1912 to 1941.

After Hitler’s *Blitzkrieg* victories in 1940 the United States reached agreements with Britain and other nations on bases overseas, including Newfoundland, Iceland, Greenland, and Bermuda. Then, after entering World War II with the Japanese attack on

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Pearl Harbor in 1941, Washington acquired an array of overseas bases and facilities in Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Asia. Despite rapid post-war demobilization, occupation kept U.S. forces in Europe and East Asia (especially in Austria, Germany, Japan, and Korea) during the onset of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Crises in Berlin, Greece, Iran, and Czechoslovakia, and the Korean War led to many U.S. commitments, which required retaining and upgrading much of the World War II base structure.

By the eve of the Korean War in 1950, the 12 million Americans who had been under arms during World War II had been reduced to 953,000, with 328,000 overseas. The latter included 122,000 in Europe, 150,000 in Japan, and only 500 in South Korea. (American and Soviet occupation forces had been withdrawn from Korea by mid-1949.) The Korean War resulted in a huge expansion of the Armed Forces. The highest level of U.S. military strength (and overseas deployments) during the war came in 1953, when the combat stopped. As shown in the accompanying chart, overseas deployments remained relatively high in the 1950s and 1960s, with a quarter to a third of all active forces serving in some 35 countries, mainly in Europe and East Asia.

The decline in overseas bases and force levels began in the late 1960s. The causes included technical factors—for instance, improvements in command, control, communications, and intelligence; the shift from medium-range B-47s to long-range B-52s; and increased numbers of ICBMs and SLBMs for strategic nuclear deterrence—as well as political events in France, Okinawa, Libya, and Vietnam. As the chart shows, substantially fewer personnel served at home or abroad after the Vietnam War. Various factors explain this decline, including the emphasis of the Nixon Doctrine on more balanced burden-sharing in alliance relations, reduced defense spending, and the move to the all-volunteer force (which created a smaller, costlier personnel system). The 1970s saw further reductions, with partial disengagement (Spain, Thailand, and the Philippines) or total withdrawal (Morocco).

The overall force levels overseas nonetheless remained remarkably consistent through the 1980s, with a brief surge during the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War.

The end of the Cold War in 1989–91 led to substantial cutbacks in U.S. force structure and overseas deployments. The drawdown has been most dramatic in Europe, where two-thirds of all the bases have been closed and forces have been pared from 341,000 in 1989 to 109,000 in 1995. The reduced threat and the sense of diminished need for overseas deployments seem to have encouraged and justified withdrawals hastened by other factors (for example, the departure from the Philippines in 1991–92 after the unfavorable votes in the Manila Senate and the eruption of Mount Pinatubo).

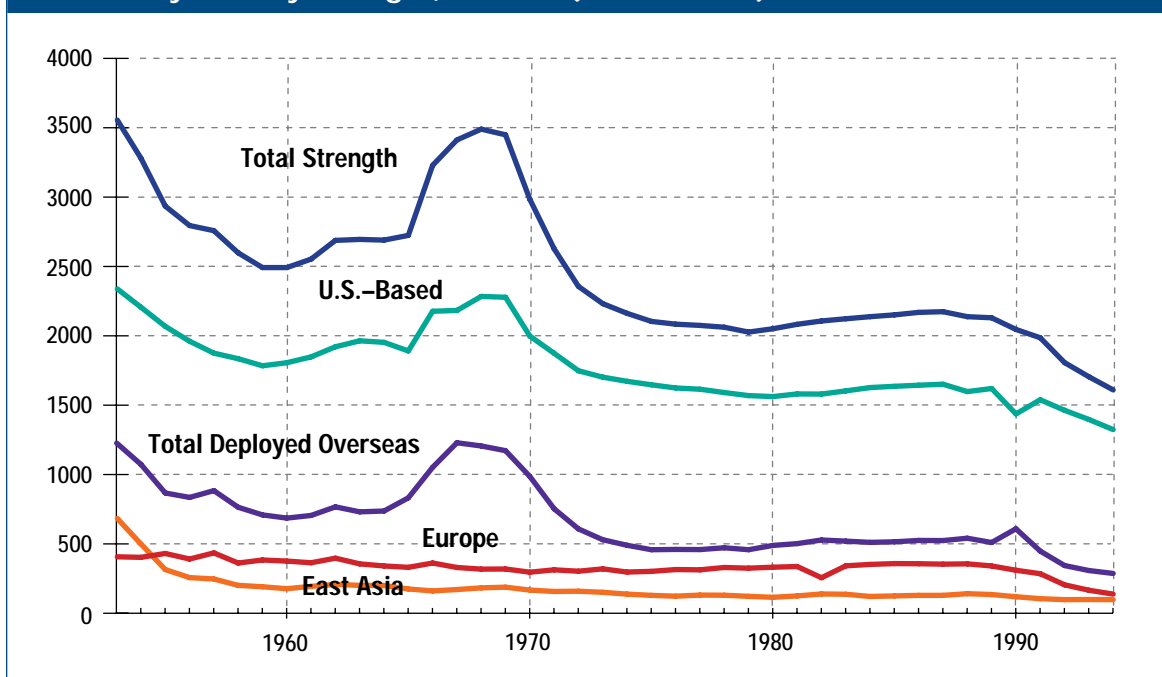
Historical Purposes

The United States has deployed forces overseas for many purposes short of war. Prior to World War II these included protecting commerce and trade routes, deterring and punishing piracy, enhancing prestige, cultivating relations with foreign governments, restoring order, guaranteeing the collection of debts, and defending American citizens and interests during regional upheavals.

The primary justification for FDR's first base accords in 1940 was U.S. forward defense. Overseas deployments can provide early warning of aggressive actions and furnish opportunities for prompt response and defense in depth. Moreover, they facilitate the organization of coalitions for collective defense against aggression and multilateral enforcement of international law. Another purpose has thus been post-war occupation to enforce peace settlements, including disarmament and political reeducation (as in Austria, Germany, Japan, and Korea following World War II). The restrictions on Iraq since the Gulf War—including those enforced under Provide Comfort and Southern Watch—offer a contemporary example of efforts to uphold a peace settlement.

Owing in part to its interest in deterring—and, if necessary, fighting—adversaries far from North America, the United States has made numerous security commitments. Its forces have thus helped protect host countries against coercion or aggression, as well as allies without a continuing military presence such as Norway, Denmark, and

Active Duty Military Strength, 1953-94 (in thousands)



Source: Department of Defense, *Worldwide Manpower Distribution By Geographical Area* (1953-94; various reports).

France. The United States has given credibility to security commitments by placing these forces (and, in many cases, accompanying dependents) at risk overseas.

In backing its commitments with forces abroad, the United States has reassured nations that might otherwise seek nuclear weapons or other exceptional capabilities. Overseas presence has thus supported non-proliferation. Besides, it has—by making political will manifest—contributed to broad goals of deterrence, war-prevention, political and economic stabilization, and influence in regional balance of power configurations across Europe, East Asia, and the greater Middle East. These purposes support larger goals, such as supplying an enduring framework of confidence for trade and (at least in some regions) democratization efforts.

Moreover, bases in Europe and East Asia have provided essential logistical support for forces operating far beyond the host countries, as in the Middle East and Persian Gulf. Overseas presence has also offered: means to cultivate relationships with foreign governments to improve prospects for U.S. access to key facilities during crises; resources for exercises and other bi- and multinational activities (including foreign military sales) that maintain interoperability; opportunities for

joint and multinational training in specific climate or terrain conditions and combat zones; and facilities for maintaining and protecting air and sea lines of communication and for ensuring orderly air and maritime traffic control and freedom of navigation in international waters and straits.

Since the late 1980s overseas presence has also become a major element in operations other than war—peace operations, embargoes, no-fly-zone enforcement, nation-building, arms control, democratization, civil-military education, et al. Special operations forces, moreover, participate in unobtrusive foreign internal defense programs that protect societies from anarchy, subversion, and insurgency, and that promote human rights and civilian control of the military.

U.S. forces were deployed at their highest levels after World War II in three conflicts—the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars. In situations short of actual combat during the Cold War, the largest concentrations were in Europe, particularly Germany. This was understandable, given that the bulk of Soviet military power was in Europe, including Russia west of the Urals, with the best-equipped forces massed in Germany. In view

economic and demographic trends will constrain the capacity to maintain forces abroad

of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the withdrawal of former Soviet forces from Central and Eastern Europe, the continuing shift in U.S. overseas commerce from a transatlantic to a transpacific emphasis, the increase in military and economic potential in Asia (notably in Japan, China, and India), and the dangerous situation in Korea, the continued concentration of U.S. forces in Asia might appear more likely than the retention of significant force levels in

Europe. But the Gulf War and subsequent events have shown a continuing interest in Middle East oil. The political obstacles to prepositioning equipment and basing forces in large numbers in this region constitute one of the many arguments for sustaining the U.S. military presence in Europe.

Domestic Factors

Economic and demographic trends will constrain U.S. defense spending and the capacity to maintain a large defense establishment, including forces abroad. It will probably be hard to arrest the continuing decline in defense spending underway since 1985 for several reasons: pressures to reduce the deficit; possible tax cuts (or at least a reluctance in Congress and the White House to raise taxes); and growth in entitlements (Social Security, Medicare, et al.) and interest payments on the deficit. These payments will be about \$257 billion in FY96 (16 percent of the Federal budget), and almost equal to defense spending (\$262 billion). Medicare and Medicaid will total \$271 billion while Social Security will amount to \$351 billion. Some project that spending on Medicare and Medicaid will grow at a 7 percent annual rate in real terms in 1995–2000, in part because of increased demand due to the continued growth of the elderly population. During 1983–93, defense spending fell from 6.3 percent to 4.7 percent of GNP, and it is expected to decline further.⁵

In this budgetary context (absent a major international crisis), decisionmakers may perceive financial incentives to further reduce deployments overseas or to demand more host nation support from foreign governments. In this regard the debate in the House of Representatives in 1994 on the

Frank amendment was noteworthy. It called for reducing authorized end strength for NATO Europe unless host nations paid 75 percent of nonpersonnel costs (on the model of the agreement with Tokyo). Without the compliance of our allies, the amendment would have cut strength to 25,000 personnel in Europe and reduced end strength worldwide. The Frank amendment was approved in the House by a vote of 268 to 144, and arguments in its favor were essentially economic—equity in burden-sharing, deficit reduction, and economic competitiveness.⁶

Economic arguments and domestic pre-occupations take on greater political significance at times when no serious threat is on the horizon. The sense of a challenge to vital U.S. interests that justified an extensive overseas presence during the Cold War seems to be in decline. The lack of a galvanizing ideological as well as military threat to NATO or world security has raised doubts in the minds of many Americans about the need for much of the remaining overseas presence.

A recent survey of American elites found that “almost half of the Influentials would keep U.S. troop strength in Europe at the 100,000-man level. . . . More than one-third . . . would cut significantly below the 100,000-man level, however, and more than one in ten favor bringing the U.S. force home entirely.” In contrast, the survey reported “a strong two-thirds majority . . . favored keeping U.S. troop strength in South Korea . . . at 39,000 men.”⁷

The same survey found noteworthy differences between U.S. elites and the general public in foreign policy priorities and with regard to the possible use of force:

The Influentials were clearly prepared to send American fighting men to honor long-standing U.S. commitments and protect vital interests. By margins of about two-thirds or more, they would support the use of American forces to defend Saudi Arabia against Iraq, South Korea against North Korea, and Israel against Arab invaders. . . . Compared to the Influentials, the public appeared willing to go to war for almost nobody. The exception was to fight Iraq (53 percent approve, 40 against). . . . The public was strongly against fighting on behalf of South Korea (63 percent versus 31 percent), and marginally against fighting for Israel (48 percent versus 45 percent).⁸

At both the elite and popular levels, the determination to exercise greater caution and selectivity in accepting security commitments overseas—even of a limited and humanitarian nature—appears to have grown, especially after the 1992–94 Somalia intervention.⁹

Americans looking for rationales to cut overseas commitments have found inspiration in the long history of U.S. isolationism. Some cite John Quincy Adams: “America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.”¹⁰ Indeed, George F. Kennan, the author of the famous “X” article on containment which appeared in 1947, has argued that the principles outlined by Adams are relevant today. Kennan now advocates a “principle of nonintervention” and suggests that “The best way for a larger country to help smaller ones is surely by the power of example.”¹¹ Others propose disengaging from Cold War security commitments and exercising greater restraint in intervening or assuming obligations overseas,¹² adding to the plurality of viewpoints on U.S. international security policy.

The Future Security Environment

The increasing caution about overseas commitments has also stemmed from a resurgence of ethnic conflicts in Europe, Africa, the former Soviet Union, and elsewhere—complex, intractable, age-old antipathies that seem impossible for outsiders to resolve at a reasonable cost and that do not appear to involve vital American interests. The potential security environment, including possible requirements for U.S. military action, is nonetheless far more complex than this general impression.

To begin with, overseas bases may not be as readily available as they were during the Cold War. Political and social trends

Osan Air Base, Korea.



U.S. Air Force (Jim Steele)

Macedonia.



Combat Camera Imagery (Efrain Gonzalez)

abroad may make it more costly and difficult for the United States to maintain bases, facilities, and burden-sharing and host-nation support arrangements in specific countries and regions. In a number of nations there seems to be a growing sentiment that foreign bases amount to a derogation of sovereignty, and sometimes anti-Western or anti-American feelings are concentrated against such installations. There is no longer a convincing Soviet threat to persuade host governments to put up with a politically sensitive U.S. military presence.

Moreover, it became apparent in the 1970s and 1980s—particularly in Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Japan—that greater consensus, coordination, and combined action would be needed for the United States to be able to use the facilities. The obligation to get permission from a foreign country before taking military action has seemed irksome to some American officials

and members of Congress and has reinforced interest in disengagement, unilateralism, and autonomous military capabilities less dependent on foreign facilities. Specific cases differ, however. The desirability of U.S. presence for general regional stability or immediate security needs may be rapidly reassessed, depending on circumstances. Base access may be directly related to the degree of perceived threat and consequent need for help. For example, Iraq's action in August 1990 led to a prompt revision of Saudi policies on foreign military presence. Since the Gulf War some U.S. equipment has been prepositioned in Kuwait, complementing facilities in Oman, Bahrain, and elsewhere.

In surveying probable sources and types of conflict—challenges for overseas presence and power-projection capabilities—it is useful to consider a range of scenarios and critically evaluate forecasts about the future security environment. For example, Robert Kaplan's provocative article, "The Coming Anarchy," draws on Martin van Creveld's *The Transformation of War*, and both are subject to the same criticisms: overstating the

decline of the nation-state and underestimating the prospect for large-scale power competitions and conflicts in coming decades.¹³

A recent book by Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky contains a useful point of departure for thinking about the international situation at hand. They contend that the industrial democracies of North America, Western Europe, East Asia, and the South Pacific constitute "zones of peace," with political systems favoring compromise, tolerance, consensus-building, and power-sharing. The rest of the world consists mostly of "zones of turmoil," burdened by poverty and either actual or latent ethno-national struggles. Although the industrial democracies are economic competitors and often differ over how to deal with conflicts in the "zones of turmoil," and although some assert national autonomy on a Gaullist model, there is no prospect of armed conflict among them in the foreseeable future.¹⁴

This study may nonetheless understate the importance of continuing U.S. engage-

Major Active Air Unit Locations (as of June 30, 1994)



Source: Armed Forces Information Service, *Defense 94 Almanac*.

the potential for large-scale conflict in Europe should not be underestimated

ment for political stabilization in Europe and East Asia and the vast differences between the regions. East Asia lacks institutions comparable to NATO, the European Union, and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Democratic institutions are, for the most part, less firmly established. The economic dynamism of specific rising powers is such that—given the unresolved territorial disputes and historical grievances—the region seems much more “ripe for rivalry” than Europe. According to Aaron Friedberg, “While civil wars and ethnic strife will continue for some time to smolder along Europe’s peripheries, in the long run it is Asia that seems far more likely to be the cockpit of great power conflict.”¹⁵

The potential for large-scale conflict in Europe should not be underestimated, however. Though clashes in the former Yugoslavia and the Caucasus have been contained so far, both could lead to wider wars with greater involvement by external powers, including Islamic countries. Russia could present greater uncertainties, owing in part to the risk that democratization efforts could fail and the Russian federation could break apart. Anarchy and civil war, or confrontations with states such as Ukraine, could draw in other powers and result in major conflicts.

Long-term assessments of the international scene should take other risks into account. For example, a depression could lead to a sharper decline in U.S. defense spending as well as overseas presence and engagement, in conjunction with a rise in protectionism and the formation of antagonistic trading blocs, even within supposed “zones of peace.” Anti-Western as well as anti-U.S. ideologies vehemently articulated in some Islamic and East Asian circles could give new purposes to those bent on the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction—leaders who seem to be motivated mainly by regional ambitions and insecurities. Relatively fragile communications and energy infrastructures in America as well as other advanced societies in zones of peace could become targets for adversaries from zones of turmoil, risks that could be incentives for closer cooperation—and continued U.S. engagement and overseas presence.

Some speculation has focused on the possibility of facing new military peer competitors. Owing to its rapid economic growth—according to some, its GNP could exceed our own in 25 years—China is seen as a potential military peer competitor of the United States if it can avoid civil war and maintain its cohesion. Speculative long-term analyses have also mentioned Russia under dictatorship, Japan after events such as Korean unification and U.S. disengagement, and even India if it could gain greater political and social cohesion. Even if they did not become peer competitors, some observers suggest, such countries might become “niche competitors” with substantial capabilities in certain areas—for instance, land-based sea control—or, at least, sea denial (to counter foreign naval forces in littoral areas).

The Changing Nature of Warfare

New methods of combat could well alter overseas presence requirements, especially if a revolution in military affairs (RMA) is underway or imminent. Although various definitions of the concept are in circulation, it is generally agreed that an RMA requires the combination of advanced weapons and associated systems based on new technologies, innovative operational concepts, and astute organizational adaptations. The result of such a revolution is a basic change in the character and conduct of operations, with substantially increased combat effectiveness.

Specialists do not agree on the identification of previous RMAs but offer examples such as the standardization of parts for large-scale arms production, plus mass conscription (1789–1815); the railroad, telegraph, and rifled weaponry (1850–71); and the internal combustion engine, aircraft, radio, radar, carrier air, and strategic bombing (World Wars I and II). During the interwar period Germany was the most farsighted and adept in preparing for land warfare, including coordinating airpower for ground support, while Japan and the United States both exploited carrier aviation and developed concepts and organizations for long-distance operations and amphibious attacks.

If a new RMA is at hand, it may be based on advances in at least three areas of technology:

▼ information systems to gather, process, and disseminate data about targets and plans as

well as to deny data to an enemy and thus create an “information gap” or “information dominance”

▼ extended-range, highly accurate conventional munitions

▼ simulations techniques to train forces and develop new capabilities and operational concepts. It is generally agreed that such a revolution might have greater effects on mid- to high-intensity conventional warfare than on low-intensity conflicts or “operations other than war,” and that mastering the new capabilities (with the requisite new organizations and operational concepts) could take twenty to fifty years.¹⁶

Changes foreseen by current assessments of a new RMA remain to be demonstrated, and some observers have reservations about these assessments.¹⁷ If such a revolution was realized, it would put a high premium on jointness—that is, a closer integration of capabilities to exploit information and long-range precision-strike systems in virtually simultaneous and multidimensional land, sea, air, and space operations.

changes in high-intensity conflict may imply reduced need for forward bases

Operational and organizational innovations could include improved forces dedicated to strategic mobility, information dominance, space control, forcible entry, long-range precision attacks, air superiority, and strategic and theater defense.

Some implications for overseas presence would flow from the probability that an enemy might also obtain new capabilities. In that event, perhaps in 2015–20, prepositioned equipment, ports, airfields, ammunition stockpiles, and infrastructure could become large fixed targets, highly vulnerable to long-range precision-strike attacks. Some speculate that an enemy with extensive surveillance and target-acquisition capabilities might monitor the oceans far offshore and make U.S. carriers vulnerable to precision-guided missiles in some situations.¹⁸

In other words, future planners may find incentives to cut forces overseas, including naval forces in littoral areas, to lessen the risk of losses in preemptive attacks. Alternatively, to operate in range of enemy strike systems, U.S. forces might need improved mobility, stealth, deception, and active defenses—and enhanced means of preemptively neutralizing surveillance, command and control, and strike systems. Some envisage arsenal ships

armed with long-range precision-guided missiles and other strike systems that would imply a drastically reduced need for a huge logistical infrastructure ashore, with reloads, personnel support facilities, and so forth.

Mobility, dispersion, deception, stealth, electronic warfare, and active defenses might be better sources of protection—and wiser investments—than costly permanent installations. It might be desirable to increase investment in maritime prepositioning and to investigate the potential merits of dispersed, “transitory,” low-cost facilities as well as the sustainability of defenses for a smaller number of permanent bases. Overall, changes in high-intensity conflict may imply reduced needs for forward bases and prepositioning ashore but call for maintaining access to foreign-operated facilities. Low-intensity conflict, crisis management, and overseas presence activities comparable to those in recent years might, however, be conducted with assets little different from those today. Requirements for temporary but prolonged overseas basing in support of specific operations might also emerge.

Even with a new RMA, some continuing purposes of overseas presence will require forces abroad, on land or at sea—for instance, to maintain relations with foreign governments and militaries, partly to improve prospects for access to facilities; demonstrate security commitments; and support broader missions such as political stabilization, deterrence, and war-prevention. But presence will probably continue to decline from Cold War levels for political, economic, and military-technical reasons, perhaps without clear-cut strategic decisions in the near term.

Grand Strategy Choices

Although deliberate decisions about overseas deployments and security commitments may be evaded or postponed, the United States will eventually face fundamental choices. It will not be possible to coast indefinitely on the inertia of the immediate post-Cold War era, cutting forces and spending on a percentage basis while trying to retain all the essential elements of past policies.

It was pointed out in 1986 that World War II and subsequent Cold War commitments put the United States “in an unprecedented position of geopolitical extension,”



USS Shreveport,
Norway.

U.S. Navy (Franklin P. Call)

with virtually global deployments. This position is difficult to maintain on logistical grounds, given the need to protect sea and air lines of communication, overseas bases, and related assets; costly to sustain because of the expense of overseas basing, reinforcement capabilities, extended deterrence, C³I, and support facilities; and dangerous to retain, in that overseas commitments imply the risk of being drawn into foreign wars, including nuclear conflicts.¹⁹

It was also pointed out in 1986 that “Virtually the only way in which this country is ever likely to become involved in a nuclear conflict would be in support of one of the overseas commitments which we took on forty years ago. If avoiding nuclear war were the sole objective of our foreign policy, the critical first step would undoubtedly be to withdraw from these responsibilities and to bring our forces home.”²⁰ Exactly this sort of argument for disengagement is now made in some circles, justified not only by the end of the Cold War but also by increased risks of nuclear proliferation.²¹

Aaron Friedberg suggested that America’s unprecedented overseas engagements would be “hard to justify over time to a democratic polity,” given its isolationist traditions. As a result, U.S. policymakers have had to provide justifications for the “effort, expense, and danger of intervention and

continuing engagement.” Three approaches have been available:

- ▼ an “explicitly imperial” rationale—glory, economic gain, even a “civilizing mission”
- ▼ power politics—preserving a favorable balance of power and securing national interests
- ▼ ideology—America’s duty “to oppose an inimical political creed or to promulgate its own beliefs.”

Except for the era of the Spanish-American War, Friedberg observed, Americans have been reluctant to see their nation as an imperial power. A combination of power politics and ideology has usually provided the rationale for involvement in war and overseas commitments in this century.²²

The argument can be made that U.S. security commitments and military presence in Europe and East Asia help to prevent local arms races and power competitions and thus diminish the risks of war. The political stabilization function may, however, become less and less credible in domestic politics. In effect, the argument is that U.S. involvement helps to prevent or postpone arms competitions and conflicts between major powers in Eurasia. Ultimately, such wars may take place—perhaps in fifty or a hundred years. American politicians and commentators may ask whether lessening the possibility of such major-power regional wars is worth the expense and security risks involved.

Such questions draw attention to the crossroads America faces. As Friedberg asked in 1986:

How could the case for continuing U.S. engagement best be made? . . . Presumably the truest, and one hopes therefore the most persuasive, argument will involve again a blending of ideology (both positive and negative) and power politics. Perhaps it will also have to include an appeal from necessity, which has a somewhat unfamiliar ring to American ears. However difficult the course on which we embarked forty years ago and however distant its end, the alternatives to it are all likely to be far worse.²³

Engagement versus Disengagement

In broad terms the Nation faces a choice between continuing engagement and disengagement. As the figure suggests, continuing engagement would imply an enduring and central U.S. role in meeting challenges to international security. The United States would

Engagement versus Disengagement

| | Continuing Engagement | Disengagement |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Basic U.S. Role</i> | Remain at center of international security management efforts | Concentrate on immediate security needs |
| <i>U.S. Posture Overseas</i> | Provide extended deterrence and other types of protection and support (including intelligence) to allies and key security partners | Withdraw from extended deterrence and cut other security commitments and partnership activities (including intelligence-sharing) |
| <i>Near-Term Costs</i> | The more difficult course to pursue politically, owing to domestic priorities and the short-term analysis tendency in U.S. politics | Perhaps the course of least resistance in domestic politics—less costly in the near term, with fewer immediate risks |
| <i>Long-Term Implications</i> | Lower probability of regional conflicts among major powers, but continued immediate risks | Higher probability of major-power regional conflicts owing to renationalization and greater multipolarity, and more nuclear proliferation, with the risk of the United States being drawn into war on unfavorable terms |

thus maintain extended deterrence and other protection and support to key allies and security partners, and corresponding capabilities including global surveillance and power-projection assets. This would represent a more difficult course in U.S. domestic politics, because it would involve a higher level of immediate costs and risks. But it might substantially reduce prospects for major-power regional confrontations and thus markedly lessen long-term costs and risks. The alternative of disengagement would be less costly in the near term, after the United States absorbed the initial cost of withdrawing and disbanding forces, transporting and storing equipment, and closing bases. But disengagement could radically increase long-term risks. Long-standing alliances could break down, perhaps in a surprisingly rapid “renationalization” of defense policies; regional power vacuums and arms competitions could emerge; nuclear proliferation could accelerate; and power configurations unfavorable to U.S. security interests could arise.

Some prominent Americans have underscored the U.S. role as a guarantor and stabilizer to prevent unwanted outcomes. For example, in August 1991, after the attempted coup in Moscow, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney warned that disengaging from our alliance commitments could cause destabilization by encouraging nuclear proliferation:

If I look at Germany or . . . Japan, I see two nations that I hope will continue to be close allies of the United States. . . . I would think [that] if the United States cuts back so much that all we can do and all we can talk about is defending the continental United States, we'll create an incentive for other nations that do not now feel the need to develop their own nuclear arsenals to do so.²⁴

Similarly, shortly before joining the Clinton administration, Walter Slocombe, who currently serves as the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, wrote:

A unified Germany would not readily rely indefinitely on a British or French deterrent. The practical issue, therefore, is whether there will be U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe—or German ones. So long as there is a reluctance to see German nuclear weapons, there will be a strong case for an American nuclear guarantee made manifest by the presence of nuclear weapons nearby.²⁵

In February 1995, Joseph Nye, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, indicated that one of the purposes of forward presence in the Asia-Pacific region is to “discourage the emergence of a regional hegemon,” adding that “[the] United States has the capability, credibility, and even-handedness to play the ‘honest broker’ among nervous neighbors, historical enemies, and potential antagonists.”²⁶

One must distinguish between different models of disengagement and various outcomes of reduced involvement in Eurasian power configurations. What might the U.S. military posture look like under a disengagement approach that was nonetheless oriented to defending immediate and longer-range security interests? The defensive perimeter would naturally include Alaska, Hawaii, and U.S. territories in the Pacific and the Caribbean and might extend to the mid-Atlantic and the northern part of South America, to protect access to Venezuelan oil. Investments in intelligence, space, ballistic missile and air defenses, and nuclear forces would have to continue and perhaps be increased to compensate for greater instabilities

the damaging consequences of disengagement might take years to develop

and risks in key regions. America would still need airlift, sealift, maritime prepositioning, power projection, and interventionary capabilities that,

in turn, might need to be improved to compensate for a lack of forces, equipment, and installations prepositioned forward ashore. It is not clear whether the financial savings would be significant in relation to the increased risks to national interests, such as overseas allies, economic and security partners, and key resources—to say nothing of the greater potential for major-power regional rivalries and wars, absent the U.S. engagement as a stabilizer and balancer.


While disengagement options would require extensive analysis, one might also postulate a *comprehensive* disengagement rather than a *partial* disengagement as outlined above. This would imply a far smaller military establishment; a defensive perimeter limited to territorial possessions; continued or increased investments in intelligence, space, ballistic missile defense, air defense, and nuclear forces; and greatly reduced airlift, sealift, power-projection, and interventionary capabilities. In this hypothesis, a withdrawal from the greater Middle East might be justified by the emergence of hydrogen fuels or other substitutes for oil, new oil deposits, and greater conservation measures. More generally, the advocates of a U.S. withdrawal from Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East might appeal to arguments such as the following: commerce will continue in the economic self-interest of the trading

partners; arms competitions, wars, and other struggles among regional powers do not engage vital national interests; peace is “divisible,” contrary to the rhetoric of those who would entangle the United States in the Eurasian balance of power; and America can best serve democracy by minding its own business, addressing its domestic problems, and serving as a good example.

Such arguments may gain political potency and should not be dismissed as shortsighted or as half-truths without due analysis. The military posture and national security strategy postulated under either a partial or comprehensive disengagement appear, however, to pose greater long-term risks than being immediately engaged and well-positioned to shape the international security scene. The damaging consequences of disengagement might take years to develop, but there can be little doubt about their nature. Crisis response actions and overseas commitments and deployments are scrutinized abroad for signals of the risks that America is prepared to accept and the behavior that it is likely to oppose. U.S. disengagement could be destabilizing because some nations might seek to acquire new capabilities (including nuclear arms) and establish new coalitions to substitute for partnership with the United States.

Fundamental choices are involved: To what extent can the United States sustain over the long term the task of serving as a central leader in world security management, one of the strongest guardians of international order in the U.N. Security Council, and a key stabilizer and balancer inhibiting new major-power regional rivalries and conflicts? The limits to America's resources and the nature of its interests argue for international engagement, renewing the key alliances, and pursuing skillful, long-term efforts to maintain alliance cohesion and military interoperability and effectiveness. For its own security, the Nation must promote an international security environment which is pervaded by confidence in its military credibility and in America's political sagacity and staying power.

The United States should be resolute in upholding its commitments to key security partners. Backed by overseas presence and

other capabilities, these commitments contribute to a structure of stability and order (albeit imperfect). This structure will be necessary, for the foreseeable future, to promote vitality in the world economy, sustain democratic reform, organize collective action against aggression and other threats (such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction), and ensure America's own security and prosperity. Uncertainty about our political will and priorities over the long term can only be addressed through persuasive and steadfast leadership. Doubts about the wisdom of continuing our overseas engagement would, of course, be compounded by political and strategic blunders. Hence, perhaps even more than in the past, U.S. leaders will have incentives to cultivate discernment and to exercise selectivity in the face of specific military challenges. 

NOTES

¹ Special thanks are owed to members of the overseas presence working group sponsored by the Institute for Joint Warfare Analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School. The historical section benefitted greatly from the advice of Frank Schubert, Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Among the best sources on overseas presence are George Stambuk, *American Military Forces Abroad* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1963) and Robert E. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition for Overseas Bases: The Geopolitics of Access Diplomacy* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982).

² For background, see Ellen C. Collier, ed., *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–1989* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, December 4, 1989).

³ Paolo E. Coletta, ed., *United States Navy and Marine Corps Bases, Overseas* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 115–21, 202–06.

⁴ This arrangement was modified by treaty in 1978. The United States agreed to withdraw all its forces by the end of the century, but with (1) a permanent right to return to defend the canal against any external threat to its neutral service to the ships of all nations and (2) a guarantee that U.S. warships would have a right to expeditious passage in emergencies.

⁵ The data in the last sentence of this paragraph may be found in U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers, 1993–1994* (Washington: Government Printing Office, February 1995), p. 87. The Office of Management and Budget furnished the rest of the data in this paragraph.

⁶ *Congressional Record* (May 19, 1994), pp. H3736–46. No comparable amendment was passed in the Senate. In August 1994 the House-Senate conference committee approved a defense authorization bill for FY95 that substantially qualified the Frank amendment. The level of roughly 100,000 as the authorized end strength for Europe was retained for the end of FY96; but the Frank

amendment goal to have our European allies pay at least 37.5 percent of the stationing costs by that date was adopted by the conference committee.

⁷ Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, *America's Place in the World: An Investigation of the Attitudes of American Opinion Leaders and the American Public about International Affairs* (Washington: Times Mirror Company, November 1993), pp. 37–38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 26.

⁹ See, among other sources, Andrew Kohut and Robert C. Toth, "Arms and the People," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 6 (November/December 1994), pp. 47–61.

¹⁰ John Quincy Adams, then Secretary of State, address on July 4, 1823, cited in George F. Kennan, "On American Principles," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 2 (March/April 1995), p. 118.

¹¹ Kennan, *ibid.*, pp. 123, 125.

¹² See, for example, Ronald Steel, *Temptations of a Superpower* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹³ Robert Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 273, no. 2 (February 1994), pp. 44–76; Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

¹⁴ Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky, *The Real World Order: Zones of Peace/Zones of Turmoil* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1993).

¹⁵ Aaron L. Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia," *International Security*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Winter 1993/1994), p. 7.

¹⁶ For background, see James R. FitzSimonds and Jan M. van Tol, "Revolutions in Military Affairs," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 4 (Spring 1994); Andrew F. Krepinevich, "Cavalry to Computer: The Pattern of Military Revolutions," *The National Interest*, no. 37 (Fall 1994), pp. 30–42; and testimony presented by Andrew F. Krepinevich and Andrew W. Marshall before the Subcommittee on Acquisition and Technology, Senate Armed Services Committee, May 5, 1995.

¹⁷ A.J. Bacevich, "Preserving the Well-Bred Horse," *The National Interest*, no. 37 (Fall 1994), pp. 43–49; and Carl H. Builder, "Looking in All the Wrong Places?" *Armed Forces Journal International* (May 1995).

¹⁸ Barbara Opall, "China Sinks U.S. in Simulated War," *Defense News* (January 30, 1995), pp. 1, 26.

¹⁹ Aaron L. Friedberg, "America's Strategic Position," *Parameters*, vol. 16, no. 4 (Winter 1986), pp. 30–36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²¹ See, for example, Ted Galen Carpenter, "Closing the Nuclear Umbrella," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2 (March/April 1994), pp. 8–13.

²² Friedberg, "America's Strategic Position," pp. 36–38.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁴ Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney, address to the American Political Science Association, August 29, 1991, p. 8–1 of text furnished by the Department of Defense.

²⁵ Walter B. Slocombe, "The Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in a Restructured World," in Patrick J. Garity and Steven A. Maarens, eds., *Nuclear Weapons in the Changing World: Perspectives from Europe, Asia, and North America* (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), p. 63.

²⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region* (Washington: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, February 1995), p. 23.